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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 001279

SIPDIS

DEPT PASS TO AF/W
LONDON AND PARIS PASS TO AFRICA WATCHERS

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ASEC](#) [NI](#)
SUBJECT: YELWA: WITH WOUNDS STILL FRESH, RESIDENTS ARE
SLOW TO RETURN

REF: A. ABUJA 1234
[B](#). ABUJA 1277

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN CAMPBELL FOR REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D).

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary. On June 23-25, Poloff traveled to the Middle Belt state of Plateau, visiting Jos and crisis-torn Yelwa-Shendam where over 800 people were killed in a long-drawn communal conflict in May this year. The small town of Yelwa-Shendam was a ghost town with few residents returning. The visit was the first by any USG official since the imposition of State of Emergency (SOE) by President Obasanjo on May 18th. This is the third of four Plateau State cables. End summary.

The Attack, and the Town Today

[1](#)2. (U) On June 23-25, Poloff traveled to the Middle Belt state of Plateau, visiting Jos and crisis-torn Yelwa-Shendam where over 800 people were killed in a long-drawn communal conflict in May this year. The small town of Yelwa-Shendam was a ghost town with few residents returning. The damage from the attacks was clearly evident on Poloff's June 24 visit to Yelwa. Scorched brick walls were all that remained of most buildings along the main roads. Poloff did not see any working gas stations; all had been burned. Yelwa's pre-massacre population was about 30,000, but in late June, it was nearly a ghost town. Despite the presence of police checkpoints at all three highways into town, along with a police tank at the main intersection in the town, very few residents had returned.

[1](#)3. (C) Narrating his own ordeal during the May 2 massacre, Yelwa Local Councilor Garba told Poloff that the day soldiers guarding the town were withdrawn, the Tarok militias attacked the residents with sophisticated weapons, regular firearms, local machetes, and even bows and arrows. The attackers first came through the Langtang-Yelwa road before encircling the entire community. Most residents fled on May 2, then another attack came on May 3, killing many of those who remained in the town. Human Rights Watch (HRW) told the Ambassador on July 13 that, in one incident, some 30 injured people sheltering in a clinic were killed on the second day of the massacre (reftel A).

[1](#)4. (C) Yelwa residents showed Poloff the site of a mass grave, very close to the Nigerian Red Cross office, where signs announced that over 630 bodies were buried. Garba introduced two women and a little girl who said they had been taken captive by the attackers and released just before Poloff's visit. In Jos, Muslim leaders gave Poloff a list with the names of 21 women they said had been ransomed from the attackers, for amounts of 10,000 to 140,000 naira each (\$75-1050). They also gave Poloff alleged transcripts of interviews with some of the abducted women. For example, one interview was with a 15-year-old Muslim student, who said that she had been abducted with seven of her classmates, forced to drink alcohol, and raped for five days until she was rescued by military patrols. A 20-year-old Muslim housewife said she had been kidnaped with 15 other women, raped repeatedly, and forced to drink homemade brandy and eat pork. Both women said they saw 3000-4000 "armed bandits with heavy guns." Like Zaki-Biam, the site of a massacre in 2001, Yelwa remains a shell with no apparent prospects for the rapid recovery of its social life.

As the Body Count Rose, the GON Failed to Act

[1](#)5. (C) Interlocutors identified the slow response to the Yelwa attacks by the federal and state governments as one of the factors that aggravated the crisis. Bureaucratic procedures, slavish adherence to the chain of command, poor communications, and a lackadaisical approach to security reports by the two tiers of government broadened the scope of the conflicts. For instance, the killings in Yelwa in May lasted for 2 days before soldiers were deployed to the area, even though Yelwa is only about 20 minutes' drive from an army battalion permanently stationed in Shendam main town.

Suspended Plateau State Assembly Speaker Simon Lalong, himself a native of Shendam, offered one explanation for the slow response. He recalled that during one previous conflict, the former battalion commander quickly dispatched a contingent to protect Yelwa-Shendam, but instead of receiving kudos for taking appropriate action, he was investigated and reassigned "for not properly waiting for instructions, which made the current commanding officer reluctant to send troops there until clear instructions were received from Abuja or Jos." By the time the soldiers reached the scene of the violence in Yelwa, hundreds of lives had been lost, and many properties had been burned.

16. (C) Suspended Governor Dariye told Poloff--and many others agreed--that as governor, he did not have the power to give instructions to the police or military personnel. The police chief and army commanders in the state did not report to him, instead receiving their instructions from Abuja. As chief security officer, he was privy to some classified information, but that was the extent of the governor's authority.

17. (C) Dariye complained that the GON did not provide enough funds to support peacekeeping operations in the areas, lamenting that "the National Assembly has just approved over 2 billion Naira (about \$15 million) for the administration of the SOE. If I had such money from the Federal Government, the situation would not have escalated." Dariye further complained that the state government had often had to pay the allowances of military and police personnel involved in peacekeeping operations in the areas, even though these salaries should have been paid from the federal budget.

When and Where Will the Blood Flow Again?

18. (C) Comment: Although the Yelwa massacre was not committed by the police or army, as in the Odi and Zaki Biam massacres of 1999 and 2001, respectively, the GON still bears much of the responsibility for the bloodshed. Tensions were high in Yelwa, but security forces were withdrawn nonetheless, allowing the attackers to approach Yelwa unmolested. When the massacre began, army forces didn't leave their base, just a few minutes down the road, until two days and hundreds of casualties later. Until the SOE, the GON did not focus on Plateau State. Ongoing crises in Adamawa, Benue, Delta, Kano, and many other places continue near the boiling point, and it remains to be seen whether the GON will take action to turn down the heat. End Comment.
CAMPBELL